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studies them by taking them apart and getting to finer levels of detail. In computer science, quick-and-dirty hackers start with pieces and put them together and look at their implications.¹⁴

Computers enable programmers to live at the very edge of their intellectual abilities; like the centaurs of myth, they become cyborgs, part human and part machine. In science fiction, if not philosophy of science, they have the salvation of the "alien" going for them.¹⁵ "Demo or die" they say, not publish or perish. Make the case for your idea with an unfaked performance of it working at least once or let somebody else at the equipment. Their focus is invention rather than studies, surveys, critiques. Engineering is a peculiar form of scholarship.

Earlier I mentioned an electronic or poetic gesture or moment or project that commits the whole being of the video artist. I am somewhat chastened by the word "hand-waving" made flesh at the Media Lab. Hand-waving refers to what a speaker does animatedly with his hands as he moves past provable material into speculation, anticipating and overwhelming objection with manual dexterity. Sometimes hand-waving precedes creation, sometimes substitutes for it.

What constitutes healthy communications?¹⁶ Communication ecologists identify equivalents of tides or turbulence or vaporization. We speak today of a cyberspace, where great corporate hotcores burn like neon novas with data so dense that you suffer sensory overload if you try to apprehend the merest outline. Engines without governors rev up and explode. But culturally, I believe we can depend upon mythologies to increase in intensity to maintain humanity's requisite variety. In our wired world, is there not a fable for a teenager with a new car, taking risks, finding new freedoms, whose self-discovery can be a privilege to be around if he's not found on the road some stormy night in an excruciating and tragic traffic accident?

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Selling Out "Max Headroom"

Rebecca L. Abbott

Americans came to know a new television personality in 1987 named Max Headroom, although *personality* is perhaps not quite the right word for him. Max first appeared by way of commercials for Coca-Cola as well as in the several books written about and even by him, then on Cinemax, and finally in the short-lived television series produced by ABC in the fall of that year. The TV series represented an unusual climax in the development of this unusual character, a development that brings several issues into focus. For instance, it illustrates how commercial forces can alter and even erase the nuances of the source material they work with; how commercial television can shape and manipulate the values and attitudes of its viewers; and how established cultural forces can absorb and defuse subversive forces in order to make them serve the very power structure these forces are attacking. Because these processes are both subtle and powerful, it is worth taking a closer look at how they work, or worked, in the case of "Max Headroom."

During the spring of 1987, ABC Television developed "Max Headroom" as a four-episode pilot to test the waters for a full-blown series that began, and ended, in the fall of the same year. This rather abrupt ending, however, was the culmination of a complicated evolutionary process that began with an idea of the British television producer, Peter Wagg, to create a computerized character to feature on a

music video television series. The creation was meant to be satirical, a parody of talk-show hosts, and Wagg invited Annabel Jankel and Rocky Morton, both noted producers of rock videos, to give the character some life, so to speak. The result was Max Headroom. Morton and Jankel also created a television movie "to explain" his fictional history; Max, like the "replicants" in *Blade Runner*, needed a past in order to have a personality. This movie was entitled *Max Headroom: 20 Minutes into the Future*, and it premiered on British television's Channel 4 in April of 1985. Between the American and British productions, however, a sequence of events transformed the Max phenomenon from his initial role in the 1985 Morton and Jankel "biographical" television movie through the stage of being hot commercial property. This included Coca-Cola's 25 million dollar advertisement campaign ("c-c-catch the wave") as well as the combined efforts of Karl Lorimar, Bantam Books, and Vintage Books to ride that wave. This commercial campaign is itself worth examining, for by the time Max was reincarnated for ABC, the transformation of his story was complete.

On the surface, the ABC/Lorimar version of Morton and Jankel's original movie bears a close resemblance to its forbear. In fact, large segments of the original script were retained in the first four episodes of the ABC series, as were many of the special effects images and the two leading actors, Matt Frewer and Amanda Pays. The central plot of both the British film and the American program is set, as its title suggests, in a large urban center "20 minutes into the future" even though, more realistically, its time-frame is several years hence. The city itself is not identified and could be London or New York; the landscape is distinguished only by the advanced degree of urban blight and decay evident everywhere. It is a chilling scenario in which huge, gleaming skyscrapers are intermingled with the gaping ruins and crumbling shells of other buildings. The masses are noisy, violent, boorish, and many are homeless. Perhaps it is a postapocalyptic, post-nuclear vision, but it might simply be a worst-case temporal fulfillment of the kinds of conditions one finds in any modern city today. And while the cause or causes of these conditions is left unspecified, they bear strong resemblance to what we find in recent films such as *Blade Runner*, *The Road Warrior*, and *Brazil*, with the prevalence of surveillance and other control devices strongly reminiscent of Orwell's *1984*. It is a vision of the future world fashioned by a pessimistic projection of the worst trends of contemporary culture.

Both the original film of *Max Headroom* and the American series

paint a portrait of an "electro-democracy" completely embedded in technology, totally absorbed in television viewing, and wholly governed by corporate television networks. There are, in fact, 4,000 television channels in this videopolis, with a small number of overarching network/conglomerates fighting to control these viewer-citizens through their television sets.

Central to the story is Network 23, the most successful and popular network with its award-winning news reporter Edison Carter. In both versions of "Max Headroom," Carter discovers during a routine story investigation that Network 23 has been experimenting with a new form of advertisement called a "Blipvert" invented by the corporation's boy genius Bryce Lynch at the bidding of the network's board chairman, which is potentially lethal to certain viewers. The blipvert condenses 30 seconds of advertising to 3 seconds in order to prevent viewers from switching channels during an advertisement. The heightened intensity of brain activity causes the more slothful viewers quite literally to explode.

While ferreting out the truth from Lynch's secret office/workshop, Carter, the reporter, is pursued by thugs whom Lynch has hired. He tries to escape on a motorcycle but he runs into an exit gate marked "MAX HEADROOM 1.3M" and is knocked unconscious. Lynch, the computer whiz, tries to find out if Carter gained access to corporate secrets and, in the tradition of the cinematic Frankenstein, he connects the now comatose Carter's brain to his computer to create a completely computer-generated character based on him. It is this new character who gives the program its name, for in "coming to life" the computer-generated version of Carter can at first only remember what it saw last—the words "max headroom"—which it repeats in a staccato, random fashion, and which Lynch decides to call it.

Taken this far, the story of "Max Headroom" would seem to be a daring and novel subject for a network television series. It suggests that a major network like ABC is responsive to public concern regarding the deteriorating quality of life, urban blight, dehumanization by an all-pervasive technology, and fear of totalitarian control of society by corporate interests, especially the fear that corporations will foist anything on the unsuspecting public simply to increase profits.

These, then, are the themes upon which the original film was focused. But in the hands of ABC/Lorimar a strange, but not surprising, series of twists take place. For example, in the original film, once Max has begun to materialize, the chairman of the board of Network 23, Mr.

Grossberg (Mr. "Big City"), makes Lynch dispose of his computer-generated experiment, thinking it is worthless. Max winds up, however, in the hands of an antiestablishment pirate television station called "Big Time TV" (whose slogan is "day after day, making tomorrow seem like yesterday") run by Punks, and he becomes their champion. Not only is Max irreverent and sarcastic, but he knows Network 23's secret about blipverts. He instantly attracts viewers for Big Time TV through his disarming brand of humor, and contributes to the ultimate downfall, by way of a revived Edison Carter, of both Grossberg and Lynch. In short, Max becomes a free agent on the side of the media underground dedicated to combating the stultifying control of Network 23.

In ABC's version, however, Grossberg (now renamed "Grossman") is not put off by Max but takes a liking to him. As Lynch puts it, Max represents the prospect of a "completely programmable news reporter," something for which the network has been longing. But even though Max turns out not to be programmable at all, remaining something of a loose cannon with the ability to roam about at will within the network computer's memory and to unexpectedly appear on screen in order to expose Grossman (as in the original version), he nevertheless remains the puckishly loyal associate of Network 23 devoted to the increase of their ratings. In other words, while Max is certainly a free agent, he is now on the side of the controlling network/corporation. Big Time TV is excised from the script in short order, and with it the singular image of pathos from the original film, which shows forlorn, homeless people sitting huddled amidst the crags of decayed buildings and warmed only by the light of their television sets. Presumably these are the people to whom or for whom Big Time TV tries to speak, but they are excluded in the ABC version. And Lynch, who as he puts it "only invents the bomb but doesn't drop it," becomes friends with Carter and his collaborator Theora Jones (the love interest). These three, then, plus Max, carry out the continuing exploits of Edison Carter's award-winning journalism.

The formula that emerges in the revised ABC version of "Max Headroom" is obviously designed to mold viewer sympathy towards the big network instead of against it as was the case with the original. Moreover, Network 23 is obviously analogous to ABC since it wants to become the biggest network with the highest ratings. Hence the new controlling formula altogether subverts the intent of the original. By preserving the basic setting, characters, and story line of "Max Headroom,"

ABC/Lorimar seduces the viewer into thinking that ABC is truly concerned with the dehumanizing processes that have generated these wretched social circumstances with the implication that ABC somehow stands outside of or is beyond any kind of responsibility for these processes.

The visual style of the American program also conspires to mislead viewers about its thrust. ABC's "Max Headroom" is a faster-paced, slicker version of the British original, but both are highly innovative in style. Wideangle lenses and a very mobile camera are used extensively, again anticipating the visual impact of *Brazil*. "Cinéma vérité" is the hallmark of Network 23, bringing its viewers, and the film's, to news events in progress with the vividness of reality but none of the risk. The editing technique is extremely nimble and rapid fire, creating an almost constant dance between objective and subjective perspectives. Such stylistic videotechnics once again demonstrate, after MTV, "Miami Vice," and numerous TV commercials, the degree to which over 70 years of efforts by experimental filmmakers and more recently video artists have become the conventions of mass cultural fare.

Examined closely, however, one can find several adjustments to eliminate ambiguity and accommodate an ideological transformation. For example, the original film opens with a sequence of ominous shots from surveillance camera perspective, in dull black and white, as Carter's first controller sends him out on assignment. Subsequent shots are from Carter's camera perspective, and it is not until after he has escaped a dangerous situation and come back to confront his cynical colleague that there is a shot in regular, full color from the traditional "objective" perspective, which in itself is a moment of drama. The "moment of drama" is the change from surveillance camera to traditional objective perspective. In the first sequence, the surveillance camera perspectives create a sense of distance for the viewer, the voyeurism that is integral to the motives of the film. Then when Carter gets mugged during the second sequence this intrusive violence is actually heightened since it is seen from Carter's camera perspective, which is taken to be his own—a reporter's experience from inside the action. The violence reaches the viewer very directly.

These subtleties are quite lost in the ABC/Lorimar version, which uses an objective camera perspective indiscriminately throughout the series. When Carter is mugged, the objective camera captures it graphically, and the violent exchange is expanded with extra punches in con-

ventional TV fight-scene style. Later when Carter returns to the network to confront his controller, the drama (controlled in the original) is milked in this version: The single punch he throws is expanded in an exaggerated reverse-angle sequence, and the dramatic moment when he learns that his story was canceled is pumped for all it's worth by way of a long, slow zoom-in to a facial close-up.

Nonetheless, ABC's "Max Headroom" is exciting to watch, and is a real departure from most of network television programming in terms of its visual style. But this is also what makes it so profound a disappointment, and such clear confirmation of the criticism often leveled against commercial television. By making imagery so important, particularly the imagery of "news-making," surveillance cameras, and omnipresent TV screens, ABC seems to be getting ready to tackle some fundamental questions of the effects of mass media on society: the invasion of privacy; mass control through the mass media; the closer and closer bonding between government, business, and media; and even the implications of artificial intelligence, of which Max is an example. But ABC avoids these issues altogether, demonstrating once again how elements of allegedly subversive, probing inquiries directed at the core of the established culture, can be subsumed and contained within a dominant corporate system.

Later episodes of ABC's "Max Headroom" are even more effective at obscuring important but controversial issues. To illustrate, it is again necessary to describe the plot of one of the later programs, which this time has no source in the original British film but is entirely new material.

The fourth episode of ABC's series establishes that one huge central computer controls all the technology of the city in a network that connects electrical, communications, transportation, even plumbing systems: in short, all the functions of the urban environment. Televisions are located everywhere, and it is illegal to turn them off. Voting takes place by computer, instantly, with election outcomes prearranged by the contestants. People who have avoided or refused registration within the central computer are called "blanks" and are considered outlaws. The Orwellian landscape is complete.

The crisis that evolves in this episode has to do with a threat posed by a group of "blanks" who have gained access to the central computer to shut off all of the television sets in the city. The blanks have two demands: they want the release of other blanks who have been impris-

oned for evading the system, and they want to stop public manipulation by the "false God" computer/television system.

Edison Carter, Max, and his colleagues, resolve the crisis, naturally, but they arrange a telling compromise. Carter secures the release of the imprisoned blanks by the newly elected government head. But Carter's view is that the masses of people in the city cannot live without TV. "Without their TV's, what is there for them?" he asks, and others agree that "without television this city would be ungovernable." The corrupt, unfeeling, and egomaniacal government head remains in office, Network 23 remains the paternalistic custodian of the "people," controlling them "when it's for the public good." Television remains always on, always present, always shaping and manipulating the public mind.

ABC has certainly played its hand boldly. The cultural values that emerge after watching ABC's "Max Headroom" describe a society split into three classes: government and corporate heads; the poor, boorish, slothful masses; and the intellectual/professional elite of which Edison Carter and Theora Jones are a part. And it falls to the professional class whom Carter, Theora, Lynch and Max represent to defend the interests of the masses, but only insofar as those interests serve the insatiable needs of the corporations. It is a completely hopeless, cynical vision of society that ABC has painted, and its image of the broad masses of the public, which presumably could be equated with the same masses it hoped to court and even serve with "Max Headroom," is devastating.

At this point it is important to address the question of who is responsible for such choices. As Edison Carter himself puts it, "Who is suppressing the story?" This is a key point, and when speaking of ABC as being responsible for the decision to manipulate the plot of "Max Headroom" in order to influence viewers, it is important to note the complex combination of forces at work when a program is planned for network television.

The primary purpose of commercial television, of course, is to sell audiences to advertisers and earn profits for shareholders. Subsumed in that process is the goal of attracting viewers. The networks have always felt the pulse of the public as anxiously as any medical practitioner, although not so much out of concern for the actual health of the patient as from a desire to continue the patient's dependence on their services. Certainly there is much at stake when 30 seconds of prime time sells for anywhere from \$80,000 to over \$400,000; networks can be expected to do all they can to look out for their interests and those of their sponsors.

The result of their efforts, realized in the programming fare prescribed for their audiences, has been viewer demand of such magnitude that the average American television is on upwards of seven hours per day. This level of saturation has reaped for the caretakers of broadcast television untold rewards in corporate profits. Hence, the medical analogy is not really appropriate, since the treatment is meant to be addictive, not healing.

Within the major networks, the system for determining what programs will be aired is also closely constrained. Hegemonic forces such as the dominant cultural ideology and economic setting, to begin with, establish the particular notions of "common sense" or "normal practice" that underlie the decision-making process.¹ In relation to this, Edward J. Epstein's and Gaye Tuchman's studies of the hierarchies and practices of one aspect of American network production, that of news reporting, are very instructive for demonstrating the degree to which dominant cultural values and assumptions are reinforced in both the process of hiring and promotion of reporters, and in the processes of choosing and investigating actual stories.² The pressure to increase ratings and revenues remain major factors.

Beyond that, it is occasionally possible to identify single individuals who are responsible for choices, who make decisions that determine what will appear on air at a scheduled time, and what will not. Av Weston, for example, assumed directorship of ABC News in 1969 (partly in response to Spiro Agnew's attacks on the press), and was given absolute power to oversee, approve, and direct every news story and script before it was aired.³ He essentially controlled what the audience of the ABC Evening News saw, and described his job this way: "A television news broadcast can be produced in any number of different ways. Every executive producer should have a concept before he begins and it is up to him to translate that concept into the reality of approximately thirty minutes of moving pictures, slides, maps, graphics, anchor-men, field correspondents' reports and, hopefully, commercials."⁴ So a great deal of responsibility for one network's news can on occasion be located fairly accurately in one individual, if not a group of like-minded ones, and it is reasonable to extrapolate from this that much the same process takes place for purely entertainment programs as well.

In the case of "Max Headroom," one individual who has had great control has been producer Peter Wagg. Certainly his original aims were none other than to create a marketable product. After the tremen-

dous success of *Max Headroom: 20 Minutes into the Future* on Channel 4 in Britain (in the manner of Big Time TV the show doubled their ratings for the time slot), the network went ahead with a weekly talk show and created translated versions for foreign countries.⁵ As the character Max grew in popularity (he even had a column in a London entertainment guide) Wagg set his sights on the American market, and it was there where the lucrative Coke contract and other opportunities developed. It was Wagg who persuaded ABC (after both NBC and CBS declined) to agree to an American television series with himself as the executive producer of the program, and Brian Frankish as the producer.

According to Wagg, ABC Entertainment President Brandon Stoddard "told him to make the show his way and that the network would find an audience for it."⁶ Nevertheless, changes were made. Wagg felt that "the deliciousness of the show is that a network is allowing us to show how the system works, how ratings are important, why Americans are given the same old material."⁷ But what he seems not to have noticed is the degree to which he sold out to that system along the way, extracting the teeth of his watchdog and leaving just its bark. *Newsweek* reported that Wagg was made to cut an entire scene from one episode of the show, apparently because ABC felt it was "too risky" to have a village destroyed by a satellite named Reagan III.⁸

That an established cultural power should harness subversive energies for its own purposes is nothing new, nor is it novel for entrenched forces to paint flaws as strengths. Roland Barthes sees the process of transforming essential weaknesses into positive qualities in this way: "Take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it *in spite of*, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes."⁹ Stephen Greenblatt has written on the subject of subversive rechanneling in its Renaissance manifestations. In his essay, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion," Greenblatt demonstrates how a radical interpretation of Moses as a "juggler" or manipulator of Christian faith was actually applied in the service of English colonial interests, in order to manipulate the beliefs of Native Americans so that the Christian God could be wielded over them.¹⁰

Although it may at first seem far-fetched, the religious analogy is strangely appropriate in the case of Max Headroom. For television in the West has arguably taken the place of religion as the "opiate of the

masses." In his multiple incarnations, therefore, Max Headroom might be viewed as some kind of latter-day messiah or a phosphorescent epiphany of warning to the masses. At the very least, it's pretty clear that the star quality of a cult idol is what the makers of the television series were after for their central character, as were those involved with his endorsements. Max Headroom in the British film was the savior of "Big Time TV" and the new and rising champion of the poor and disenfranchised, the blanks who dot the ruins of the countryside sitting in the glow of their TV sets; in ABC's TV series, he was the hero of Network 23 and the masses they claimed to serve. Some might argue that this computer-generated superman could not engender the kind of faith that a true religious leader would, that Max Headroom is no modern Moses, Jesus, or Muhammad. But in an age when charismatic media figures such as Walter Cronkite, Phil Donahue, Johnny Carson and others affect, even shape, the thoughts and lives of millions of followers, Max Headroom can be seen as someone (something?) for whom such status might have been possible. For example, young people quoted in *Business Week* said: "Max is the voice of our generation and someone I trust"; "Max is a cool dude, and people listen to him." And speaking of Coke's mammoth ad campaign, Valeries S. Folkes, professor of marketing at the University of Southern California, said: "With \$25,000,000, you can create a whale of a fad."¹¹

It was the Coke ads, in which Max was "spokesthing," that did the most to make him a household word in the U.S. Two of these spots were in fact directed by Ridley Scott, director of the recent futuristic films *Alien* and *Blade Runner*. In Scott's creations, vast hoards of young kids chant "Max! Max!" until he appears on screen above them in giant proportions. According to Coca-Cola Senior Vice President John C. Reid, "Max has broken almost every record for awareness of commercials. . . . 76% of all teenagers in this country had heard of Max after our first flight of ads."¹² This approaches the messianic as closely as Madison Avenue usually gets. Beyond this lies the irony of Max Headroom, with his wired, hyper manner of artificial speech, pushing a soft drink containing caffeine and named for the same plant from which cocaine is derived—an allusion probably not lost on many viewers.

Gary Trudeau, creator of the cartoon "Doonesbury," catches the irony in the similarity between Max Headroom and Ronald Reagan. Trudeau invented a character named "Ron Headrest" who bore a striking resemblance to both Reagan and Max Headroom, which reminds us

that indeed Reagan is in many ways the Max Headroom of conservative Republicans, and was, at least initially, the messiah of the American middle class. Reagan, the quintessential actor, is a man who was programmed by his political supporters, indeed, given his complete identity, to serve their political agenda. Even his constant glib joking, and slippery "now you see me, now you don't" evasiveness are qualities that bring the ABC/Lorimar Max to mind. The major distinction between the two, of course, is that Reagan has never opposed the dominant cultural ideology in any way whatever; thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to construe him as subversive.

In sum, Max Headroom was converted from an agent of subversion in the Morton/Jankel film to one of controlling ideology in the ABC television series. Since Max was originally designed as a commercial entity, this may most simply explain the agency of transformation. Max was heralded by *Newsweek* as being the first instance of a cult hero who, in the United States, was created "as a result of his commercial performances."¹³ Certainly his "personality" lent itself to this transformation, for Max was the totally hip, completely outspoken, self-involved and self-adulatory entity entirely geared toward audience response. And while it seems fairly clear that ABC was hoping for real popular success with "Max Headroom," that was not the outcome of their experiment. The meaning of its failure, however, is uncertain. It is not entirely clear that the poor ratings for "Max Headroom" indicate that American television viewers avoided the trap Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno predicted for them by not insisting "on the very ideology which enslaves them."¹⁴ And it is puzzling to imagine who ABC was trying to target: the disenfranchised youth subculture that has been loosely associated with the punk movement? The same kids who loved him in the Coke ads? If so, is this an audience that is harder to seduce? Or did the fad simply wear thin? The program had intrinsic flaws, too, aside from its manipulative thrust: it was confusing, and it moved so fast that viewers had trouble following the complexities of the plot. Nevertheless, the fact that ABC made the attempt suggests that they felt there was a chance of success, and in a business where chances are not taken lightly, this signifies something.

It is unfortunate that network television needs to shape its programming so narrowly, because the idea of "Max Headroom" is one that offers wide and fascinating opportunities for exploring a future, highly mediated society. But since the original idea in effect calls for the

end of large-scale corporate control of media and culture, it is perhaps too much to ask of a major television network that it dig its own grave. As Blank Reg of Big Time TV announced to the "blank" generation, "You know we said there's no future? Well, this is it!"

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What is "Soul"?

Dick Hebdige

What a question!

Many cultural critics today seem fatally fixated on image, on the importance of visual signs, on the ascendancy and dominance of visual media. Various effects are imputed to TV, and such effects tend to be assumed rather than proven.

TV is pictured as a ruinous intrusion: a monster in the home. The influence of the TV cyclops is seen to be massive and invidious. In those streams of cultural commentary that present themselves as "serious" and "responsible," both inside and outside the academy, TV is more often than not accused of supplanting the family as primary socializing agent, of indoctrinating the viewer—the unprotected viewer—with false goals and values proffered by dubious role models, and by surreptitiously promoting compliance with the dominant ideology. TV is thus routinely invested by concerned intellectuals everywhere with fabulous powers. The viewer is depicted as silently absorbed, and this viewer is always *other* to the critic, who has access to superior knowledge and an exalted vantage point, the point from which the critic's demystifying critique itself is undertaken.

This silently absorbed, ideal-average viewer tends to be presented as floating outside any specific historical or social context, as a pair of disembodied eyes, as a spectator. This tends to be the case whether the